

Book Review

William Temple Foundation. *Regenerating Communities: A Theological and Strategic Critique*. End of Year One Report: Mapping the Boundaries. Manchester: WTF. December 2003

This is the report of the first of three years of research being conducted by the staff of the William Temple Foundation into the complexities of social and economic regeneration in Manchester. Manchester is the home of the William Temple Foundation and in recent years theologians associated with the Foundation have been instrumental in developing a distinctive local theology for Manchester. This has been done in partnership with the Department of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester and there has been mutual benefit in the recent establishment of the Manchester Centre for Public Theology. These developments give visitors a real sense of what it is that Manchester is able to contribute to urban theology. In the research being reviewed, the reader is aware that this distinctive contribution is being enhanced and given depth.

Three areas of the City of Manchester have been chosen for study – East Manchester itself, Moss Side/Hulme and Wythenshawe. Each has been the object of a piece of social and economic regeneration implemented according to government policy. Each area is seen to ‘emblematic’ of the way that the processes of globalisation impact upon the urban environment and also there is (or has been) a significant faith community involvement in renewal.

The research consists of three parts. First, each of the three areas of Manchester is the object of an ‘Area-based Study’ which through a field visit – a strategic accompanied walk with general questions being asked about the physical and social changes over the past 10 to 15 years – yielded a series of urban and church based themes. Photographs of key urban sites related to change effectively complement the descriptions.

Second, fourteen ‘semi-structured’ interviews were held with regeneration participants from across the sectors – government, community and voluntary sector, grassroots, church, private and other professionals including a representative from the University’s Planning and Geography Department. The analysis of the transcripts makes compelling reading and many familiar issues are described clearly. There is a helpful discussion of the mismatch between rhetoric and reality under the heading of ‘consultation’. There are insightful comments by members of non-Christian faith groups about the role of Christian groups around the area of accountability, something that we need to listen to carefully.

The third part of the research is a dialogue with five academic research areas to do with the rise of the global city and identity in post-modernity. This sections owes much to the interests of the current Director (the Rev’d Dr Chris Baker) whose conclusions from his doctoral work on New Towns are evident. There is a gold mine here for anyone seeking a guide to contemporary theories of globalising processes in the city.

One of the overriding concerns is the situation of the local church. This takes up an existing theme of Manchester reflection (found most recently in the work of Canon John Atherton): to work in partnership the local church needs to be visible, present in local congregations and effective, and how can this be ensured in face of current decline?

It feels as though the research is poised to give some answers but more needs to be drawn out about the relationship between the three levels of research. Key questions are raised. What is the role of the church in the fragile processes and matrices of regeneration? In relation to regeneration policy and practice, how far should there be 'collusion' by the church and how far 'collision'? Three existing typologies of church are identified as 'local', 'cluster' and 'network' which have varying degrees of success connecting to the wider community. On the other hand a concept of 'hybrid church' emerges from the academic dialogue which is introduced as a way of positively interacting with the culture of the post-modern world. 'Hybridity' is proposed as a concept that seeks unity in the midst of plurality and embraces 'evolution' but not 'revolution' as a means of change by listening carefully to experience and past narratives. It arises 'from the underside of colonial history and poverty' and is proposed as one criterion for an evaluation of the role and identity of the empirical church. A key conclusion from the Area-based studies and the interviews is that 'the faith sector is not necessarily willing or able to fulfil the role expected or it by government rhetoric'. This makes proposals for an ecclesiology that arises out of everyday lived experience in the globalising city urgent, but if 'hybridity' is to fulfil such a role, then signs of this model on the ground need to be highlighted as beacons of hope, and clearer connections made between the empirical and the theoretical.

'Hybridity' is only one example of some rather technical language that the reader is required to absorb: the methodology is described as 'theological saturation' in order to indicate both the inductive and deductive quality of the work, and the language of post-modern geography is not always transparent. I do not take the view that we avoid technical language and difficult categories; however, there is a clear challenge here for both authors and readers to see whether these categories can be elucidated to the point of endurance and currency within urban theology.

One of the key current questions in social ethics is whether regeneration is possible, whether the new can really be evolved from the old. This piece of research has the potential to speak to this question and I look forward to engaging with the next phase. This study really does deserve consideration by urban theological communities seeking to assert their own particular styles of reflection. The report is available online at <http://www.wtf.org.uk> and the generous invitation to those of us in other cities to respond with our own insights and experience must not be left answered.

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